

**ISS Risk Special Report:
Dhaka Terrorist Attack – An Assessment
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Executive Summary

The attack and siege of the Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka has left the world in no doubt that the militant situation in Bangladesh is worsening and not quite the 'domestic problem' the government has been claiming or presenting it as. Islamic fundamentalists in Bangladesh are patently internationalising their agenda, with a desire to becoming part of something much larger than local home grown terrorists. Several combat indicators support that this attack was long in the planning. Several of the attackers disappeared between 4 – 12 months ago, only to resurface on the day of the attack. A move away from rudimentary weapons – assault rifles and grenades – as opposed to knives and machetes is also indicative of forward planning and evidence of an increasing external influence and involvement. The fact that after shooting a number of the hostages, they were still hacked with machetes and knives indicates that the attackers wanted to make an unambiguous correlation to the previous string of attacks in the past one year, which mostly all involved rudimentary weapons.

This incident represents a significant shift in modus operandi, capabilities, intent and organisational strength. Back in April 2016, when Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) announced the anointment of their Bangladesh Emir (leader), they also made clear their intent to firstly consolidate their presence in Bangladesh and then use that as the spring board to turn their attention and resources to Myanmar and India via eastern India. It can be argued that the Holey Artisan Bakery attack demonstrates that ISIS, through local radicals and indigenous groups, has started this consolidation process. Regardless of what the government says and what media present, the need for further evidence that Bangladesh is becoming a hot zone of radicalised Islamic fundamentalists with aspirations for regionalised and ultimately global inclusion within the broader jihadist family is academic. Various media outlets have repeated the same mantra that the Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) is a local group with no verified affiliation or connection to ISIS. What further evidence is actually required before this head in the sand approach is revised and reality that the connections are there bites in?

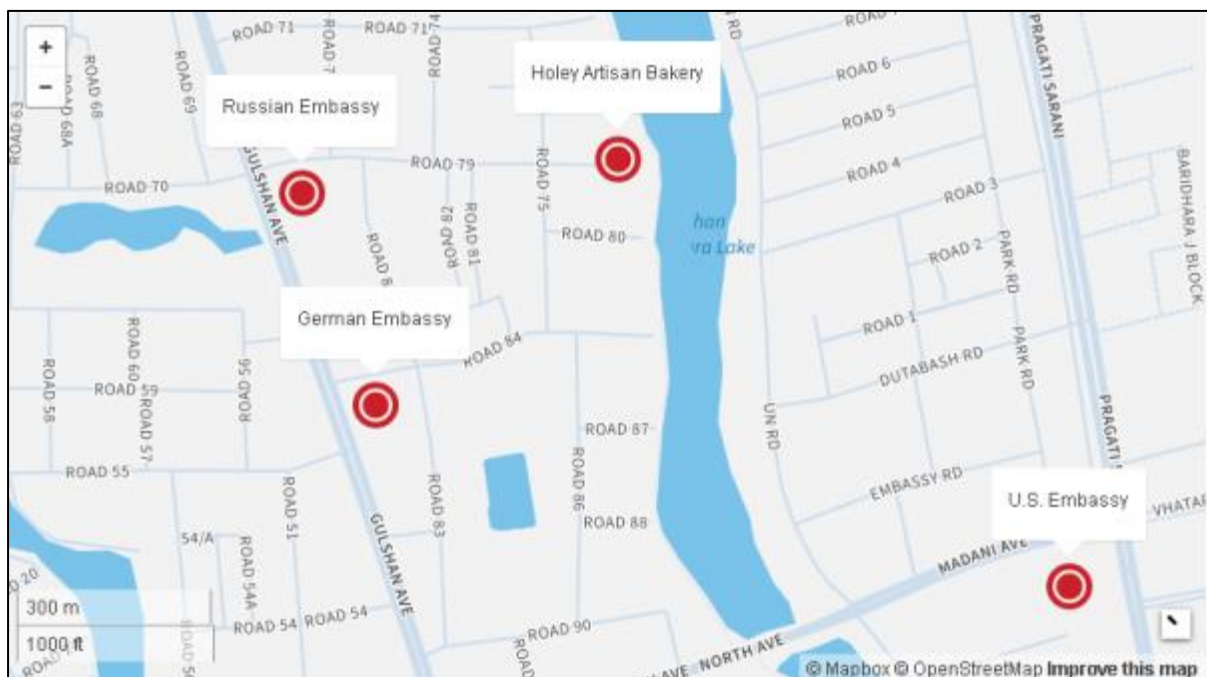
There is apparent shock that most of the attackers came from fairly wealthy families, were educated to university level and how they were radicalised has been a centre piece of discussion. This is being used to a certain extent to explain perhaps how the security services failed to pick up on them. Although the security services stated in the past 24 hours that there had been 'attempts' to arrest several of them as they were known to the agencies. One can only surmise from this that either the security services were genuinely aware of



them, though it doesn't explain though how their 'radicalisation' was missed or is a surprise. Or, it simply means that the security services were a tad stretched rounding up 'thousands' of suspects and a few cleverer suspects appear to have slipped through the net.

Introduction

The latest terrorist attack in Dhaka shocked many – due to its barbarity and lethality – but should come as no surprise to anyone who have been following the early warning combat indicators of the nation's jihadist landscape over the last two years. On the night of 1 July, at around 2045 (local time), seven armed terrorists stormed the Holey Artisan Bakery, an upscale café popular with expats, diplomats and wealthy locals at the Gulshan area in Dhaka. Coincidentally, the Gulshan neighbourhood is considered one of the most secured locations in Bangladesh, where several foreign embassies and high commissions are located.



Around 20-25 guests and an equal number of employees were reportedly present at the café at the time of the incident. And barring a few, who managed to escape during the initial moments of the incident, all others were taken hostage by the attackers. Initial attempts by the Bangladesh Police personnel to enter the facility were met with gunfire and grenade explosions, which caused death to two police officers and injuries to a few others. Then there was an unsuccessful attempt by the security personnel to negotiate with the terrorists. The siege lasted for 11 hours and ended on the morning on 2 July, when at around 0740 (local time), Bangladesh Army para-commandos stormed the building using armoured



personnel carriers. The security personnel took around 13 minutes to neutralise the terrorists – during which six gunmen were killed and one was captured alive – and the operation, codenamed ‘Thunderbolt’, was wrapped up at 0830 (local time). The security operation rescued 13 hostages – three foreign nationals and the remaining all Bangladeshi citizens. However, as many as 20 foreign nationals were hacked to death by the terrorists, using machetes, hours before the rescue operation began. Among the 20 victims of the attack there were nine Italians, seven Japanese, one Indian, one US citizen of Bangladeshi origin and the remaining two were Bangladeshi nationals.

A few hours after the siege began, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), through its official Amaq news agency, claimed responsibility for the attack.



Amaq agency continued to post updates on the attack throughout the night and also posted some pictures from inside the restaurant, which were in all likelihood taken by the perpetrators of the attack and then digitally transmitted to their handlers.



Fourth update from Amaq agency, mentioning ‘24 killed and 40 wounded so far, including foreigners’.





The pro-ISIS hacker group Sons of Caliphate Army also published a poster promoting the attack.



Bangladesh Home Minister, Asaduzzaman Khan, on 3 July said that none of the hostage takers were part of ISIS or any other international terrorist organisation; rather they were home-grown terrorists and members of the banned Jaamatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) terrorist group.

Who were the attackers?

Less than 24 hours after the siege ended, ISIS published pictures of five of the terrorists involved in the attack.



Abu Umar al-Bengali



Abu Salmah al-Bengali



Abu Rahiq al-Bengali



Abu Muslim al-Bengali



Abu Muharib al-Bengali

Although ISIS published pictures of the attackers; no information was provided about their real identity, only their noms de guerre were given - Abu Salmah al-Bengali, Abu Rahim al-Bengali, Abu Muharib al-Bengali, Abu Omar al-Bengali and Abu Muslim al-Bengali. Thus far, identities of four terrorists have been confirmed:

1. Nibras Islam:

Nibras Islam has been identified as one of the assailants as per the photo posted by ISIS. From posts on his Facebook wall, which has now been deactivated, it has been found that Nibras went missing from Dhaka since 3 February, 2016. He studied in Turkish Hope School and then studied in North South University, a top private university in Dhaka. From there, he went to pursue higher studies at Monash University, Malaysia campus.



2. Meer Saameh Mubasheer:

Meer Saameh Mubasheer was a class 11 (A-level) student. He also went missing from

Dhaka between 29 February and 1 March, this year, when he was on his way to a coaching centre, according to Facebook posts that were widely circulated during the time he went missing. One Mahamudur Rahman, who posted on Facebook that Mubasheer went missing on 1 March, posted on 2 July: “I am just astonished! 1st March, 2016 I posted his photo in this Facebook Page because he was missing from his campus. Link -<https://goo.gl/j2Lov8>. But after ISIS published those photo of #DhakaAttack attackers, I was thundered! Cause this was the same guy! He is Meer Saameh Mubasheer”. Unconfirmed sources say he studied in Scholastica, a top English medium school in Dhaka.



3. Rohan Imtiaz:



The third assailant has been identified as Rohan Imitiaz, son of Imtiaz Khan Babul, who has also been missing for the last few months according to one Facebook post of his father on 21 June, 2016 where he shared an old photo of them, asking Imitiaz where he was and also requesting him to come back. Rohan's father is said to be a Dhaka city Awami League (ruling party of Bangladesh) leader. According to some reports, Rohan also used to be an A-level student of Scholastica English medium school in Dhaka.

4. Khairul Islam:

He was the son of day labourer from Bogra district, Rajshahi division in northern Bangladesh. He studied in a madrassa and had gone missing for the last one year. The Bangladesh police believe that he was involved with at least three different murder cases in northern Bangladesh during the last seven months. Several ISIS claimed attacks have taken place in northern Bangladesh over the last one year, which were actually instances of targeted assassinations. However, it is not yet confirmed if the murders Khairul was previously associated with had anything to do with those attacks claimed by ISIS.



Additionally, the social media is abuzz with chatter that two other attackers have been identified as Raiyan Minhaj and Andaleeb Ahmed; although there has been no confirmation in that regard from main stream media or the Bangladesh government.

5. Raiyan Minhaj:

Raiyan Minhaj is suspected of being one of the attackers. He graduated in Mechanical Engineering from the Monash University campus in Malaysia in December 2015.



6. Andaleeb Ahmed:

Andaleeb Ahmed is also a graduate of the Monash University campus in Malaysia. No further details are available. However, many social media posts have identified him to be one of the attackers and matched his picture with that of one of the attackers as published by ISIS.



There is another missing link in the entire incident. Certain sections of the Bangladeshi media are reporting about a bald man, who was one of the hostages and yet, he was found to be remarkably comfortable in the otherwise extremely tense environment. Screenshots

taken from some video footage during the hostage situation revealed that this individual was smoking on the first floor of the café during the early morning hours of 2 July, with two terrorists standing behind him. Apparently, given the situation, this looks quite incredible. This bald man, along with his companions, were later rescued by the security personnel.



Later, it was identified that this bald man was an individual named Hasnat R Karim, a professor at Dhaka's North South University, who had gone to celebrate his son's birthday to the Holey Artisan Bakery with his family.



At this moment, there is too much information available about the tragic incident in Dhaka.

However, instead of making things clear, it is only contributing towards muddying an already complex event. There are many questions which remain unanswered:

- As per official records, six terrorists were killed and one of them was captured alive. Then why there is information only about five perpetrators – both from ISIS and the government. What about the sixth deceased terrorist and most importantly, the seventh one – who was captured alive.
- How come three of the five identified terrorists were all graduates of Monash University in Malaysia – what is the common link in Malaysia?
- Three of the attackers had gone missing for the last 4-5 months. No information is available about where they had gone.
- The North South University connection becomes too prominent to be discarded. First, one of the attackers was confirmed to be a former student of this university in Dhaka (unconfirmed reports indicate that another attacker might have graduated from this institute). Then the special treatment accorded to one of the hostages (and his family), the professor from North South University, is another unexplained section of this entire episode which requires further investigation.

Key observations

Several important observations can be made from the Dhaka attack:

a) Background of the attackers:

As mentioned above, all but one of the terrorists identified thus far were in their early 20s, from rich families and had modern education. Three of them even had foreign education. So, the conventional wisdom that poverty, rejection from society, lack of opportunities etc turn youth towards terrorism is not true – at least not in the context of Bangladesh. Since it is most likely that these terrorists were radicalised by people in their own social network; it means that supporters of groups like ISIS have penetrated the social institutions accessible to the well-to-do section of the Bangladeshi society. This indicates an increased catchment area for ISIS in Bangladesh and most importantly, the law enforcement agencies, who have traditionally concentrated their hunt for jihadis in religious seminaries, will now have to significantly widen their scale of monitoring to counter this increasing radicalisation.

b) Type of attack:

From the very beginning, this was an operation with no exit strategy; in other words, it was a suicide mission – something very uncommon in Bangladesh. In fact, the first recorded

instance of suicide attack in Bangladesh took place in December 2015, when a man blew himself up in an Ahmadiya mosque in Rajshahi – which was later claimed by ISIS. However, the December 2015 suicide attack was a fizzle, most likely a test run. What we witnessed in Dhaka was something which bears resemblance with ISIS modus operandi in other parts of the world – like the November 2015 Paris attacks – although in a limited scale. What is worth noting is that the founding fathers of global jihad in Bangladesh, the veterans of the Afghan jihad, who established groups like JMB and Harkat ul Jihadi al-Islami Bangladesh (HUJI-B), supposedly had all the international contacts, were not able to execute an attack close to this scale even during their heydays of jihad in Bangladesh (2001-2006), under a government considered sympathetic to the radicals. While a group of six kids, with apparently no battlefield exposure, were able to bring the entire Dhaka city to a halt and bring international focus on Bangladesh. The point is that this attack is very different from the previous targeted assassinations in Bangladesh, claimed by ISIS. It is a first instance of well-coordinated cell based attack in the nation and presence of sufficiently radicalised Bangladeshi volunteers for the execution of such attacks is indicative of a paradigm shift in the jihadist landscape of the nation.

c) Use of weapons:

According to sources, the weapons used in the attack, particularly the folded butt AK-22 assault rifle, are not readily available to jihadists in Bangladesh. Traditionally, militants in Bangladesh have relied on home-made bombs, small arms and mostly Molotov Cocktails as weapons of choice. In fact, it was after the entry of ISIS in Bangladesh, in the late part of 2014, that we have witnessed an increasing sophistication in weapons and IED techniques (for details, please refer to **ISS Risk Special Report: Growth of Militancy and ISIS in Bangladesh – June, 2016**). This makes it highly likely that a secured logistics pipeline has been established through which required hardware and perhaps human resources could be insourced to the ISIS network in Bangladesh.

d) Execution of hostages:

As well as having automatic assault rifles, the terrorist chose to also use knives and machetes on the hostages. It is our assessment that this was part of the original plan – intended to send a barbaric message, which the government can't deny. At the same time, it is our assessment that after shooting by also hacking the hostages to death, the perpetrators wanted to establish a similarity with previously claimed attacks by ISIS, where many of the victims were similarly killed with machetes. Although it is clearly unknown if all the hostages were shoot first, it was a brutal way of reinforcing their origins and validating their previous

claims of responsibilities.

e) Shift in modus operandi:

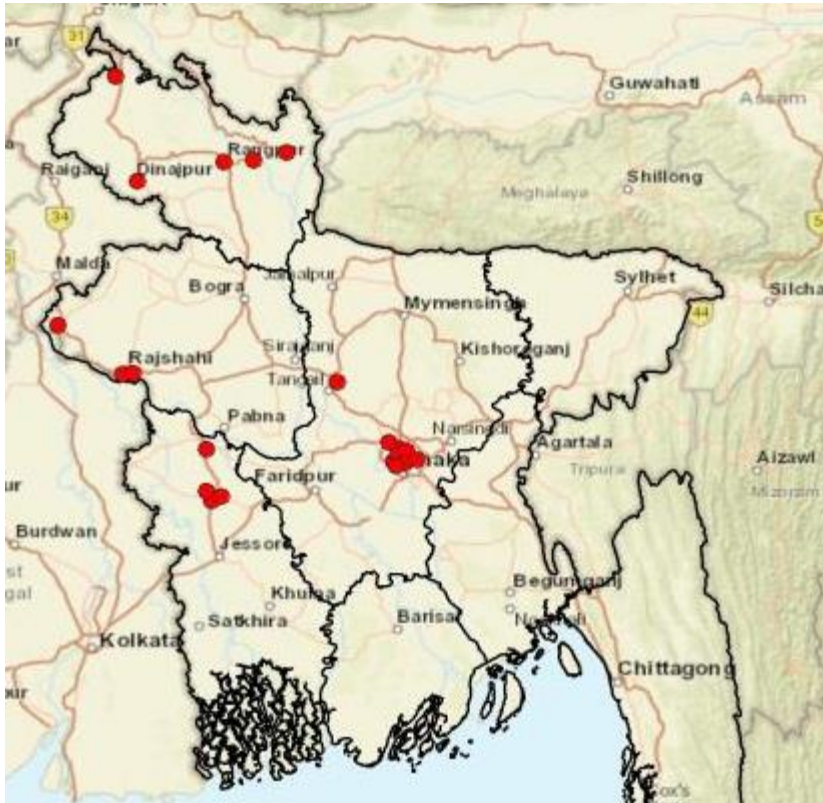
The attack is indicative of the fact that ISIS now has sufficient infrastructure and support base inside Bangladesh to plan and execute a complex attack of this type. The fact that almost all the perpetrators of the attack were missing for the last few months, suddenly emerging on the day of the attack, highlights that the ISIS network in Bangladesh has the required operational network in place. Furthermore, this being a cell based attack, with seven combatants, it is our assessment that around 28 – 35 person should have been involved with the cell in different support roles like logistics, transportation, accommodation, reconnaissance, target selection, communication etc. This should bring the total number of personnel in the cell to anywhere between 35 and 42. This leads to some further serious observations:

- Firstly, this indicates that around 40 people were actively involved in the execution of this attack – a fairly large group, giving sufficient opportunities to intelligence agencies to know about the attack in advance. However, that didn't happen and should be considered as a failure of the Bangladeshi intelligence agencies.
- Secondly, it means that the attack cell had access to that many people from the local pool of resources.
- Thirdly, only seven of them have been neutralised thus far (six killed, one arrested); the remaining are on the run and can potentially execute further attacks.
- Fourthly, the group had access to safe havens and secured communication mechanism which helped them evade security agencies.

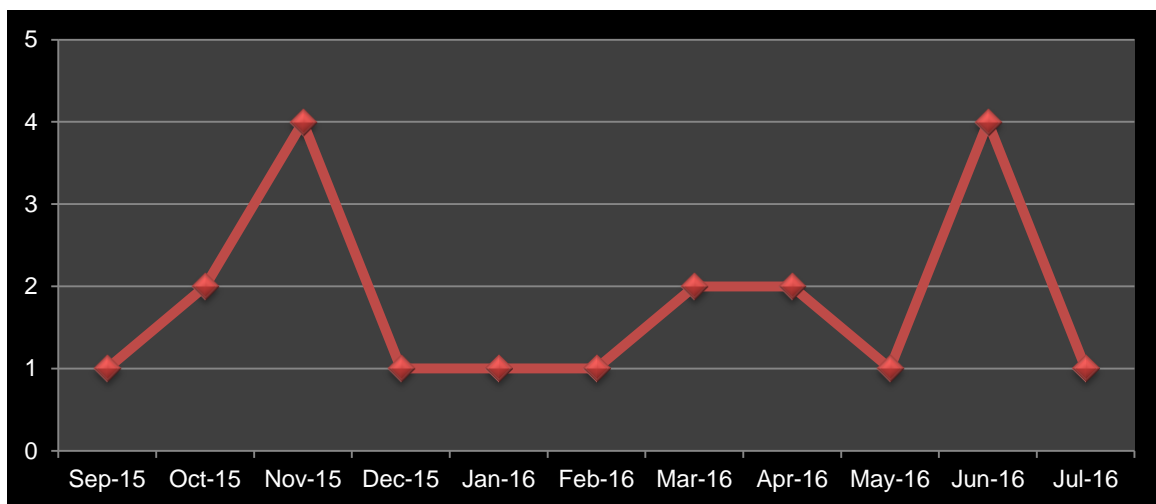
While it is worrying, to say the least, but should come as no surprise. We had identified this trend in January 2016, through analysis of several early warning combat indicators and had, at that time, identified how ISIS had developed operational presence in Bangladesh, with individuals inside Bangladesh having direct contact with ISIS headquarters in Syria, how it had augmented the operational capabilities of local affiliates and finally, how the Salafi ideology was getting prominence among the jihadists in the nation which resulted in suicide bombings, attacks on Shias – something unheard of before in Bangladesh (for details, please refer to **ISS Risk Special Report: Growth of Militancy and ISIS in Bangladesh – June, 2016**).

ISIS activities in Bangladesh

Since September 2015 until the recent Dhaka siege, ISIS has claimed to have carried out as many as 20 attacks in Bangladesh, in which more than 60 people were killed. We plotted them on a map as shown below:



We also plotted the number of ISIS claimed attacks in Bangladesh since July 2015 on a line chart:



Reactions from the Bangladesh government

Since the first ISIS attack in Bangladesh in September 2015, the Bangladeshi authorities have been denying the existence of ISIS in Bangladesh. It was not very surprising when they stuck to the same 'party line' even after the brutal attacks of 1 July; the Bangladesh Home Minister, Asaduzzaman Khan, told the media on 3 July that the perpetrators of the Dhaka siege were member of JMB and have no connection with ISIS. However, our research on the growth of ISIS in Bangladesh has revealed the following (for details, please refer to **ISS Risk Special Report: Growth of Militancy and ISIS in Bangladesh – June, 2016**).

- A definite and close connection exists between ISIS in Bangladesh and the JMB. Many incidents where JMB cadres have been found as having established contact with ISIS, former JMB members identified as active recruiters for ISIS, attacks claimed by ISIS identified as being carried out by former or current JMB members, threats to minorities being issued in the name of both JMB and ISIS etc.
- These observations could be interpreted two ways – either JMB is using the ISIS brand name to gain support and credibility, or JMB has made a strategic decision to ally with ISIS and in turn, has been allowed to look after the Bangladeshi operations and grow the organisational structure of ISIS in the country.
- To contextualise these interpretations further, a critical piece of contemporaneous data should be highlighted. In one of the issues of Dabiq, ISIS' official monthly magazine, much praise was shown to both the JMB and its deceased spiritual leader Shaykh Abdur Rahman for having founded a 'proper jihad organisation in Bangladesh' based upon the Salafi ideology.
- What needs to be recognised at this juncture is that ISIS is *very* sceptical and reticent in acknowledging the activities of other jihadi organisations, or as accepting them as pursuing a 'proper jihad', as it wants to project itself as the only true follower of jihad and Islam. On top of this, ISIS has rarely praised other jihadi organisations openly for pursuing the jihad the 'proper way'. So this open endorsement of JMB by ISIS is most likely the result of an understanding between the two groups.
- It is our assessment that JMB has either become an affiliate of ISIS or it is in the advanced stage of becoming one. A formal and open declaration is, perhaps, not being made for tactical reasons – to avoid increased domestic and international attention and scrutiny.



Conclusion

As such, it is our assessment that by virtue of recognising the role of JMB, the home minister has inadvertently admitted the culpability of ISIS in the Dhaka attack. Bangladesh is at risk of becoming a hotbed of Islamic militancy, ISIS are clearly making gains both physically in terms of gaining support through alliances and allegiances and embedding their brand of Islamic fundamentalist ideology. Regardless of desires to present this as a 'domestic or localised' problem it is patently now not so. What needs to be recognised here is that Bangladesh acts as a bridgehead between the Indian Sub-Continent and South East Asia, it is becoming a regional player for ISIS aspirations for the two regions and if not addressed resolutely and honestly will allow ISIS an accelerated growth trajectory in both regions and enable greater connectivity regionally between terrorist groupings that should otherwise be disparate.

The government can argue as much as they wish that this attack is attributed to JMB, a local group, and not ISIS. However, many other 'local' groups in different parts of the Middle East and North Africa and central Asia and the rest of Asia are now recognised as having turned to and given pledges to ISIS. This refusal like in other countries to acknowledge reality for whatever politically expedient reasoning one wishes to promote will simply allow the problem to fester and grow. The groups may well be local, of course they have a local anchor and a historic local agenda, times change, this incident is patently indicative of such changes. The undercurrent of dissent within Islam is the vein that ISIS and their predecessor al-Qaeda have tapped into and exploited, ignoring it won't change this reality; it is here to stay and will merely get stronger, expect more of the same in Bangladesh and other countries in the region where it is currently not expected or simply denied.